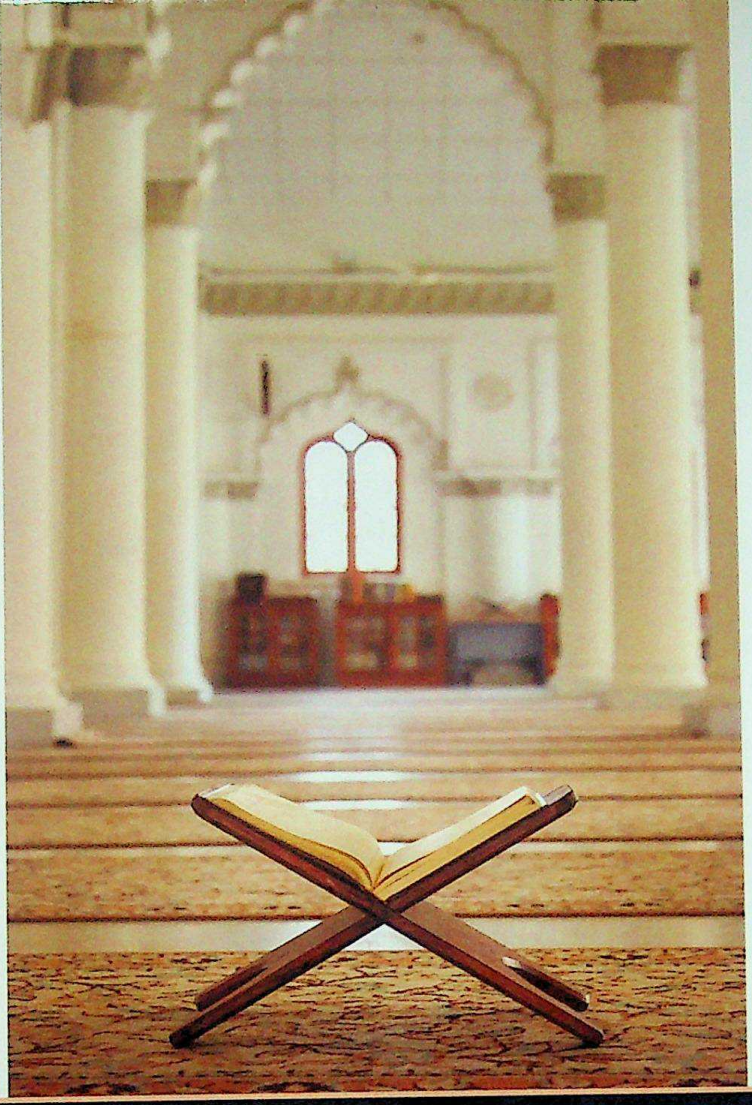

The Most Controversial Qur'anic Verse

WHY 4:34 DOES NOT PROMOTE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

John Andrew Morrow

Chapter Ten

Vocalization and Variants

Option 10 is the most controversial of all. It takes Muslims beyond orthodoxy and heterodoxy. It calls everything into question. While it is a sensitive subject for Muslims, who believe that the Qur'ān has been preserved and protected down to the last dot and letter, the inescapable and undeniable fact is that scores of variant readings, some minor, but others major, have been passed down through the *ḥadīth* and historical literature. What is more, many Qur'ān manuscripts, ranging from old to ancient, contain variants. Some are spelling conventions. Others are scribal errors. However, some feature different orders of chapters while others include variant readings that completely alter the meaning of the text.

From a theoretical point of view, it could be conceived that "strike them" or *iḍribūhunna* was originally *lā taḍribūhunna* or "don't strike them." After all, the Prophet Muḥammad is reported in books of traditions to have repeatedly commanded his followers to *lā taḍribū nisā'ikum* or "do not beat your women." To accept that such a change took place is to accept that the Qur'ān has been subjected to textual manipulation. The evidence that this was the case, namely, that the Qur'ān was changed, is overwhelming. In fact, according to Majlisī, the narrations claiming that the Qur'ān was corrupted are massively transmitted. Although this was a common belief among many early Muslims, particularly the Shī'ites, but also the partisans of the so-called "orthodox" party, it could potentially undermine the entire edifice of Islām. Hence, the mainstream Sunnī and Shī'ite dogma that the Qur'ān we have today is identical to the one the Prophet recited. If one accepts this belief, namely, that the Qur'ān's integrity, preservation, and transmission is problematic, then it matters not what 4:34 means as faith in the entire corpus of the Qur'ān will have been given a serious injury if not a death blow.

When I read the Arabic text of the Qur'ān, I always imagine all possible readings by focusing on the letters themselves and ignoring the dots that distinguish between identically shaped but different letters. Considering that early Qur'āns did not contain any *tashkīl*, the verb *ḍaraba* and *ṣaraba* are written the same way: ضرب. If *ḍaraba* has nearly sixty different meanings, the verb *ṣaraba* only has five: to cut off, to make sour milk, to restrain the urine, to bring on constipation, and to produce fresh plants. Unlike *iḍribūhunna*, which can have dozens of meanings, *iṣribūḥunna*, in this context, can mean one thing and one thing alone: cut them off, leave them, separate from them or divorce them.

The verb ضرب is so rare it does not appear in the *Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* nor is it found in the *Majmū'ah al-'arabiyyah* or the *Cambridge English-Arabic Dictionary*. It is found, however, in online verb conjugation charts such as cooljugator.com/ar and Wiktionary. It is covered, however, in the larger dictionaries of Classical Arabic, including the *Lisān al-'Arab*, *al-Qamūs al-Muḥīt*, *Muqāyyīs al-lughah*, and *al-Ṣiḥāh fī al-lughah* which can be searched simultaneously (www.baheth.info or lexilogos/English /arabic_dictionary.htm).

Considering that the earliest copies of the Qur'ān contain added characters, missing characters, unclear characters, erased characters, modifications, and text variations, is it not possible that the contentious command in question was misvoweled? Nevin Reḍā seems to be of this mind. As she explains,

> Minor orthographical changes in the guttural stop of the word *wa'iḍribūhunna* in verse 4:34 can affect the meaning quite profoundly. A strongly defined guttural stop would have the meaning of "go away from [your wives]," while a weak guttural stop would indicate a range of meanings including "beat [your wives]." In contemporary editions, it is possible to distinguish between the two stops by means of different orthographical symbols—the strongly defined guttural stop looks like an open, underlined circle (*hamzat al-qaṭ'*), while the weak stop looks like a closed, somewhat flattened circle (*hamzat al-waṣl*). However, in the Prophet's day, these orthographical symbols were not known, since they developed much later. It is therefore not possible to differentiate between them on the basis of the written text alone. (2014: 452)

While this explanation may seem pretentious and recherché, it is rooted in the father of Arabic linguistics, the illustrious Sībawayh (d. c. 796). As Nevin Reḍā elaborates in note 40,

> The strong stop indicates a grammatical Form IV (*aḍraba, yuḍribū, iḍraban* of which the imperative is *aḍrib*), while the weak stop indicates a grammatical Form I (*ḍaraba, yaḍribū, ḍarban* of which the imperative is *iḍrib* (classical) or *iḍrab* (colloquial). When adding the conjunction "w" with the short "a" vowel

> (*fatḥah*), Form I's weak *hamzah* will become assimilated into the short "a" vowel, while in theory, the Form IV's strong stop will be articulated, preceded and followed by a short "a" vowel. . . . They do not even seem to have emphasized the guttural stop in words like *sa'ala*, "he asked," where the guttural stop is a root consonant. See Sībawayhi, *al-Kitāb*, pp. 541–542. (2014: 623)

As Reḍā continues,

> It was also not realistically possible to distinguish between them aurally, particularly in the Qurayshī tribal dialect, where they tended to assimilate their stops. Once these symbols were invented, scribes needed to make a choice as to which symbol they would use, a choice that would incidentally reflect their cultural understanding of the meaning of the word. The symbol we see in today's orthography is the weak stop, which can mean "beat [your wives]." Thus, we can see that the act of writing and the choice of symbols can sometimes involve interpretation. The alternative understanding, "go away from," is reflected in *The Sublime Qur'ān* interpretation by Laleh Bakhtiar. (2014: 452)

Although it is theoretically possible that *iḍribūhunna* or "strike them" is actually *iṣribūhunna* or "cut them off," there is no strong secondary evidence to support this interpretation although it does come very close to the meaning of *iḍribūhunna* given by a minority of Muslim scholars, commentators, and translators. Is it possible that all the controversy created around the verb *ḍaraba* was misplaced and misdirected and that the original verb in question was *ṣaraba*? If so, this would signify that all the secondary sources that support the reading of *ḍaraba*, namely, the *aḥādīth* and commentaries of the Qur'ān, are falsifications. This is not as far-fetched as it may seem since some of the *ḥadīth* literature was invented for the very purpose of attempting to explain the meaning of the Qur'ān.

If the use of the verb *ḍaraba* can cause internal semantic conflicts and contradictions in the Qur'ān, the verb *ṣaraba* does not. When dealing with difficulties with wives, the steps would be simple. First, one should address the problem by words: discussion and dialogue. If words fail, the second step comes into play: separate for a time. If neither words nor actions work, a single, potentially final solution, remains, namely, cut them off, get separated or get divorced. This would make 4:34 agree with 4:128 which prefers peace and reconciliation: "If a woman feareth ill-treatment from her husband, or desertion, it is no sin for them twain if they make terms of peace between themselves. Peace is better." It would make 4:34 agree with 2:231 which counsels: "When ye divorce women, and they fulfil their [waiting period], either take them back on equitable terms or set them free on equitable terms; but do not take them back to injure them, (or) take undue advantage." It would make it agree with 2:228 which states that "husbands have the better right to take

them back in that period if they wish for reconciliation. And women shall have rights like those rights against them, according to what is equitable."

The argument made by Nevin Reḍā and supported by Brian Arthur Brown, which suggests that "[t]he error may be based on very early cultural perversions of pronouncing the text prior to the addition of diacritical marks" certainly merits close consideration (2014: 4). It is not only *iḍribūhunna* that was incorrectly interpreted or vowelized, the same can be said of 33:33 which commands the wives of the Prophet, and by extension, all women, in the minds of many Muslim scholars, to remain in their homes. This is the basis of *purdah*, seclusion, or gender segregation in Islām. In the *textus receptus*, God commands the wives of the Prophet as follows: *wa qarna fī buyūtikunna*, "remain quietly in your homes" or "remain in your houses." A variant reading, however, reads *wa qirna* which means "have dignity and serenity" (Barlas 2002: 124). As is evident, "[t]he presence or absence of one diacritical mark changes the meaning of an entire *ayah*" (2002: 225, note 38). One single sound, one single vowel, is the only difference between giving women freedom with dignity or confining them in their domestic domains for perpetuity. It is the difference between liberty and incarceration. The consequences of the orthodox reading have been catastrophic for women in certain countries.

While sexual harassment exists in many cultures, and has many causes, in much of the Muslim world, it is religiously rationalized. As I explained in "Islām in the West: Past, Present, and Future,"

> In the US, the rate of sexual harassment is 30 to 40%. Most studies speak of 1 in 4 or 1 in 3 American women being subject to unwanted sexual advances or obscene remarks. In some Muslim-majority countries, it is much higher. In Tunisia, for example, 53.5 % of women report being victims of psychological and physical violence, namely, being harassed by men, stalked, verbally insulted, and sexually harassed (Stop Street Harassment). As for Afghanistan, research conducted by Women and Children Legal Research Foundation reveals that 93% of women are harassed in public, 87% in workplaces, and 89% in educational institutions (Stop Street Harassment). Of all Muslim-majority countries, one has the worst reputation of all: Egypt, where over 99% of women are victims of sexual harassment (El Deeb; Tse; The Economist; Amin). And while some Muslims might argue that only "immoral" women are harassed, 72.5% of victims surveyed were wearing *ḥijāb*, and some were even in full *niqāb* (Zuberi). Such sickening behavior is normative in many Muslim-majority nations in the Maghreb and the Middle East. (Morrow 2016: n. pag.)

When Arabs, Pakistanis, Afghans, and Muslim men from other ethnicities, shout at women in the streets, ordering them to "stay in your homes, you whores," are they not inspired by Qur'ānic verse 33:33? Are they not attempting to enforce so-called Islāmic law?

For some Muslims and non-Muslims, both men and women, the conclusions are clear. If we cannot trust the misogynists who interpreted 4:34 and 33:33, we cannot trust their interpretation of other verses as well. Their interpretation of the Qur'ān and the sunnah, along with the laws that they derived from them, all become inherently suspect. As Amina Inloes observes, "[I]f 'orthodox' views of gender roles are questioned, then what is to stop the rest of the edifice of orthodoxy from tumbling down?" (2015: 363).

The obligatory *ḥijāb* laws, that snowballed from covering one's private parts and one's breasts, and encouraging modesty, to covering everything but one's face and hands, and eventually to covering absolutely everything, hands, face, and all; mandatory domestic seclusion for women; the imposition of extreme patriarchy; requiring complete submission to husbands, and to men in general, as if they were God; exclusion from education, employment, and participation in the public sphere; deprival of freedom of movement; forcing women to be minors for life; unequitable inheritance; the rejection or devaluation of female testimony; the jurisprudential definition of marriage as the sale of a woman's vagina in exchange for sustenance, as opposed to a sacrament or sign of God as it is described in the Qur'ān (30:21); lack or limitations in matter of divorce rights; genital mutilation; the imposition of marriages on adult women and minors; the religious authorization to have sexual relations with pre-pubescent girls; the permissibility of domestic violence as well as the sanctioning of sexual slavery form a single continuum of oppression against women orchestrated by misogynistic male supremacists.

So, no, I do not agree with Kecia 'Alī who firmly believes that "the jurists were, on the whole, genuinely interested in doing the right thing by women" (2010: 195). I contend that many of them co-opted Qur'ānic verses and fabricated prophetic traditions to malignantly limit the rights and public role of women. The mistakes of the past mar the present. It is no coincidence that the original error surfaces and contaminates everything. From day one, people lied about the Prophet. They suppressed his sayings. They twisted his teachings. They even tried to corrupt the Qur'ān as can be seen in some of its interpretations and translations. Those lies, deceptions, and deformations continue to affect Islām in a criminal way to this very day.

It is high time for the aura of sanctity that once surrounded this cabal of clerics, false teachers, Pharisees, charlatans, and moral degenerates to dissipate and evaporate, forcing us to move from blind faith and emulation to faith informed by fact. It is called critical thinking and it has been sorely lacking in the Muslim world for over a thousand years. Like Ayesha S. Chaudhry, I no longer believe in "the myth of the 'Islāmic tradition,' of the greatness of its scholars, their nobility and relentless pursuit of justice, their ability to

challenge and fight the status quo" (2013: 9). In the words of 'Abdulazīz Sachedina,

> Muslim traditionalist scholarship tends to treat any academic endeavor that questions its appropriation and interpretation of the revealed texts, whether from the Qur'ān or the Tradition, in their historical contexts as an affront to the sanctity and absolute nature of Islāmic revelation. . . . In other words, the veracity and absoluteness of the past rulings have been regarded as independent of any context and material condition for their universal applicability in the faith community. (2009: 120 and 130, Chaudhry 2013: 198–199, note 3)

As much as they are convinced that they are the "guardians of Islām" who must be blindly and unquestionably followed, arrogantly claiming that the acts of worship of those who fail to submit to their rulings will not be accepted by God, the religious authorities do not own Islām. They are concerned primarily with their wealth and power and abuse their status in order to silence those who threaten them through their thoughts. Acting like an Islāmic Inquisition, they pass edicts against scholars who refuse to recognize their authority and refuse to blindly submit to them. They are especially threatened by the concepts of religious pluralism and gender equality which they view as challenges to their domineering paternalism and suffocating authoritarianism.

Gabriel Al-Romaani, a convert to Salafism, views calls to prohibit the physical reprimanding of wives by their husbands as an existential threat to Islām. In his words:

> The Muslim community is at a juncture. Our identity, our future, the future of our children, are all in question. Will we succumb to pressure or will we triumph and rise above the blame of the blamers? Will we change the meanings of the Qur'ān like the Jews and the Christians did to their books (even though unlike previous scriptures the Qur'ānic text will never be changed as it is protected by Allāh Himself)? (2019: n. pag.)

This is utter nonsense. Muslim scholars who oppose domestic violence are not changing or corrupting the Qur'ān. On the contrary, they are opposing those who have done so already. Romaani claims that:

> Muslim communities face increasing pressure to integrate with the prevailing secular culture by reinterpreting their values that clash with the existing cultural hegemony. Many are swayed by such pressure to reexamine Qur'ānic verses or existing Islāmic legal rules to bring forth interpretations that will conform to contemporary secular values. Modern attempts to reinterpret the Qur'ānic verse 4:34, the so-called "chastisement verse," is due to succumbing to such pressure. (2019: n. pag.)

This is also patently false. Secular legal systems, in East and West and North and South, have supported the right of husbands to beat their wives for centuries. They continued a legal custom that traces back thousands of years. Most majority Muslim nations have operated under secular legal systems since independence and most of these allow husbands to physically discipline their wives. Hence, it cannot be claimed that Muslims who oppose domestic violence are succumbing to secularism.

Most Muslim scholar-activists rely on religious arguments. They seek to realign the secular laws that govern Muslim-majority nations with Islāmic ethics. They also call upon countries who claim to follow Islāmic law, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, to realign their so-called religious laws with Islāmic ethics. Since Muslims who live in the Western world are already subject to laws prohibiting domestic violence, the scholar-activists in question are relying on religious arguments to prevent wife abuse in Islāmic communities. Rather than oppose domestic violence, some men insist upon it since they feel that their power and authority is threatened. They view themselves as kings, rulers, judges, juries, and executioners.

As Khaled Abou El Faḍl has established, "Submission to God is at the core of the Islāmic creed, but it does not mean blind submission to those who claim to represent God's law. . . . Submission to God means the will and act of engaging the intellect and body in the pursuit of God, but also the humility of knowing that no intellect and body can ever fully represent God" (2013: 265).

The Qur'ān is a created book that is open to interpretation. This is anathema to the scholarly hierarchy, the priests of the letter and not the spirit, who insist on the imposition of blind imitation or *taqlīd* when, in reality, Islām demands free-will and active participation as opposed to blind acceptance and submission. Since then, writes Tim Mackintosh-Smith,

> one could only understand the word of God according to officially recognized interpretations. *Nazar* and *ra'y*—two words that mean "looking" but had come to mean "speculating and forming an opinion"—were now tainted with the suspicion of heresy. It was another case of narrowing . . . "the gate of *ijtihād*," the individual struggle to extrapolate meaning from God's revelation, was closing. And, as a recent commentator has put it, "To shut the gate of meaning is to shut down thought. . . ."
>
> Some poets, Ṣūfīs and sectarians have always flown beneath, or above, the dogmatic radar and made their own attempts to understand the word of God without interpreters, without intermediaries. By and large, however, the community of Islām, which had always prided itself on having no priests, has since the middle of the 'Abbāsid age approached the divine via the hierarchy of linguists, exegetes and other authorities, most of whom died well over a thousand years ago. Meaning was mummified. (2019: 297)

As Nimat Ḥāfeẓ Barazāngī asserts, "the individual Muslim woman," or the individual Muslim man for that matter, "is not necessarily bound by most of the secondary sources beyond the Qur'ān nor by the rules derived by jurists and interpreters throughout the centuries" (2013: 258). As she puts it, "This is an urgent issue because I see Muslim women's reinterpretation of the Qur'ān as a response to the crisis in understanding Islām, beginning on the university campuses in the American and other Western countries and reaching as far as the caves of the Ṭālibān" (2013: 258).

In order to challenge the male supremacist interpretation of Islām, Chaudhry argues that "egalitarian readings of Q. 4:34 must be able to lay claim to religious authority" (2013: 222). As she accurately perceives, "[t]he greatest hurdle to transferring authority from a mythic 'Islāmic tradition' to the living community of believers is the 'Islāmic tradition' itself; its unquestioned authority has become stifling for contemporary Muslims" (2013: 222).

The retrograde religious authorities treat Islām as a closed system. They examine Islām as if it were a fossil. They are the single greatest cause of the intellectual stagnation in the Muslim world. Their brains are like bricks forming a damn that is trying to hold back the free flow of fresh water, an Islāmic Revival and Renaissance that has been restrained, causing billions of Muslims to suffer and die from intellectual and spiritual thirst. They have the power to liberate minds; however, they chose to restrain them and chain them. They have shackled brains and souls. They use their authority to justify their own despotism. They are concerned more with the authoritarian than with the moral. They have usurped God's authority. They have imposed a paralyzing dogmatism upon Islāmic jurisprudence. What was once dynamic and diverse, full of shades, degrees, and nuances, has become black and white. Tolerance, diversity, and humility has been replaced with intolerance, absolutism, and arrogance. Oh, how they have lied in His Name.

As Abou El Faḍl points out, "[T]exts that remain open stay alive, relevant, and vibrant" (2013: 264). The religious scholars have suffocated them. They present a myopic vision of Islām. They speak in absolutes, forgetting that there is no Absolute but God. They follow their predecessors blindly. They rarely question or challenge their texts. Their interpretations advance at a snail's pace. They present the opinions of fallible human beings, full of shortcomings, as if they were facts, and as the very Word of God when they are not. They intentionally deceive their followers by speaking in absolutes and failing to disclose the broad spectrum of opinions on specific subjects that have been shared over the centuries. They fail to present the full picture. Some may pride themselves in their *ijtihād* or interpretations of the sources; however, what possible value can such efforts have when they are based on false evidence? You cannot solve a crime based on planted or tampered evi-

dence. You cannot come to the correct ruling if the sources relied upon are falsified.

As difficult as the situation may be, it calls not for despair. In fact, things are moving, and minds are changing, even in the circles of traditionally trained jurists. Take, for example, the case of Moḥsen Kadīvar who admits that:

> A fixed and immutable ruling is always just, ethical, superior and reasonable. However, men's privilege and *qiwāmah* over women, corporal punishment of a disobedient wife, permitting the marriage of an underage girl, men's right to unilateral divorce, two women's testimony being equal to one's man, a woman's blood money (*diyyah*) being equal to half a man's, a son's inheritance being twice that of a daughter, men's obligation to pay maintenance and dower—these rulings are all debatable. (2013: 227)

Considering that some jurists are moving backwards, and some are content to stand still, Kadīvar's recognition of Islām's innate ability to evolve and adapt pragmatically is a tremendous advance for the field of jurisprudence.

Any person with five functioning senses can see that the fresh, flowing waters of Islāmic law had long turned lifeless. Jurisprudence had become a stagnant pond with fetid water. Thanks, in large part, to rain, thunderstorms, streams, and water from outside sources, sweet, clear water has started to circulate once more. The creatures from this black lagoon, the ultra-conservatives, the political Islāmists, and those vested with authority who feel threatened by thought have tried to keep fresh water from entering the pond that they consider their own. They love the muck. They care not that the water is increasingly depleted of oxygen and the ecosystem that they claim to love is dying. They will stop at nothing to prevent people from saving the pond even if it means its death.

Some scholars, who are brave, courageous, and committed, are challenging the patriarchs of Islām through critical thinking and original thought. Rather than regurgitate what other scholars have said *ad nauseum* for centuries, they are making meaningful contributions to knowledge in the field. They are making advances in Islāmic jurisprudence by leaps and bounds. They admit that the commentary of the Qur'ān is androcentric. The recognize that the *ḥadīth* literature is androcentric. The attest to the fact that Islāmic jurisprudence is androcentric. They accept that all this androcentrism engenders gender imbalance. As Asmā' Lamrabet explains in *Women in the Qur'ān: An Emancipatory Reading*,

> [T]he momentum of liberation which was started by the last revealed religion was stunted in its path. The discourse on women, as it was formulated by the Qur'ān and sunnah over 1,400 years ago, was resolutely more emancipatory, distinctly

> different, even at times opposed to that which is put forward today. Whereas the Qur'ān transmitted an egalitarian message with rights and responsibilities, spoke of women in a clear effort to raise them up, responded to their requests, was in conversation with them . . . spoke of political participation . . . of political exile, of social participation, of demanding rights, of freedom of speech. . . . Today, the bulk of the discourse on women in Islāmic rhetoric is focused on abstract and infantilizing moralizing concepts.
>
> The woman is a *fitnah* "temptation," the woman is *awrah*, "illicit" to look at, debates are had on her obligatory return to the home and there is a disproportionate insistence on her dress code and her body. The majority of the current Islāmic discourse on women is limited to her body; on the most appropriate way to cover, what is permissible or impermissible in terms of clothing, on the prohibition of wearing perfume, of speaking loudly, of laughing! Is this what the message of Islām can be summed up by for women? Where is the liberating spirit of the Qur'ān and all the initiatives put forward by the text to initiate a truly autonomous status for women? (2016: 162–163)

Although it is both hyperbolic and reductionist for Lamrabet to claim that Islām was an "an aborted women's revolution" (2016: 160), the liberation of women from a merciless patriarchal system was certainly part of the plan of God and the Prophet. And while it is true that Islām challenged extreme expressions of patriarchy, one cannot claim, as Lamrabet does, that "the Qur'ān is an anti-patriarchal text" (2016: 161). The Qur'ān is a spiritual, moral, and ethical text. It is not a legal text. Although it was revealed at a specific time and place, it transcends them. It had to speak the language of the people. The rest of her conclusions, however, are brilliant. She vividly shows how early Islām empowered women. It inspired them to transgress tribal laws, break with humiliating ancestral customs, and enter the faith against the wishes of their families and tribes (Lamrabet 2016: 160). Side by side with men, women spoke up, demanded their rights, and "invested themselves materially, physically, and morally for the cause of Islām" (Lamrabet 2016: 161). Men and women, as equals, competed with one another in piety" (Lamrabet 2016: 161). The contrast she sets up is heart-wrenching:

> Women . . . massively took their place at the heart of the mosque with men, in order to educate themselves, to debate and to join in with the decisions being taken by the community. Centuries later, our mosques have become closed spaced, reserved for men, whereas women are relegated to cramped spaces, cut off from the rest of the community by walls and opaque curtains. Condemned to exiling themselves this time to the furthest recesses of the centers of learning and power, our Muslim women are resigned, they have accepted submission and worse, have transmitted their renunciation and ignorance to their descendants. . . .
>
> A historical survey revealed that at the time of the death of the Prophet there was a scholarly and erudite elite made up of eight thousand people, of which,

> one thousand were women. The emancipation conveyed by Islām in a quarter of a century meant that one person out of eight of the scholarly elite was a woman. This observation is in itself telling. How could the earliest Muslim women have acceded to these spaces of freedom, of knowledge and power, fourteen centuries ago in the name of Islām, when today there are forbidden access to these same spaces in the name of this same Islām?! What happened in between that in the name of Islām we allow things which the sacred text and tradition of the Prophet reproved of and sometimes even proscribed? How can we approve patriarchal customs replacing the sacred text. . . ? (Lamrabet 2016: 160–161)

The fact of the matter is that it takes power to challenge power. Shortly after the passing of the Prophet, however, a process of disempowerment of women took place that has lasted, in large part, into the present. With their wings clipped, how could Muslim women fly? Since they were deprived of the education that was their right as per the teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad, how could they challenge the self-serving interpretations of male supremacists who viewed women as slaves and animals? Since women were divested of all authority—political, social, economic, religious, scholarly, and academic—how could they confront the New Misogynistic World Order?

I understand perfectly well that, as a man, I am the unwilling beneficiary of the patriarchal system that oppresses and exploits women. I understand that a man who fights against domestic violence is akin to a white man who fights against anti-black racism. Such work is welcomed; however, the fact remains that it emanates from a position of power. This man, however, is a son of a mother, a nephew to aunts, a grandson to grandmothers, a brother of a sister, a male cousin of female cousins, a father to a daughter, and a husband to a wife. I cherish, value, love, and adore women and the Sacred Feminine. In fact, I even considered publishing this book under a female pseudonym, Dihya al-Kāhina.

It would be wise to remember the free woman from that famous forged tradition, the one who was commanded to worship her husband by the pseudo-Prophet Muḥammad, the fictitious Messenger of the Misogynists, as opposed to the historical, egalitarian, gentle, and loving Messenger of God. "No man will ever own my neck!" she proudly responded. That woman is me. My soul may be male, but my spirit is female. Since we were created from a single soul, men and women are halves of one another. For men to become complete, they must acquire feminine qualities. For women to become complete, they must acquire masculine qualities. A complete person embodies Masculine and Feminine Attributes. We may be biologically different, and psychologically different up to a point; however, we are spiritually the same. A man who is mature in his masculinity can own his feminine side without

fear, treat women with empathy and justice, and accept from them both appropriate correction and appropriate instruction.

Believing men and believing women, we are in this together. If this work achieves anything, I hope that it can amplify the voices of female Muslim scholars, who are often silenced by all the noise that we men make. Since the male scholarly elite of Islām believe that they are the only ones who can speak authoritatively in God's name, the societies in which they operate "effectively suppress women's ideas from being developed and their voices from being heard to protect the male dominance in the interpretive process" (Isgandarova 2019: 56).

My spirit has been mangled by knowing that many men, because they are one-sided men, are still using this verse, 4:34, of all the extraordinary verses in the Qur'ān, as an excuse to subjugate and commit violence against women. It is wrenching even for a non-Muslim and knowing how such beliefs are shared across many religions in no way mitigates the pain of this exploration. When Dahlia Eissa revealed to me in 2019 that she no longer believes that Islām treats women as autonomous beings, I neither blamed nor judged her. I completely understood and empathized. She was tired of jumping through hoops trying to make the Qur'ān an egalitarian text, let alone a feminist one. In short, she cannot conceive why the Creator would put so many obstacles in the way of a clear and transparent road to justice for everyone.

Islām, in most of its manifestations, does not grant gender equality nor does it strive for gender justice. It cloaks prejudice and misogyny in love and faith in God's will. It pretends that the patriarchal system that it imposes is benevolent when it severely traumatizes girls and women. While some Muslim boys and men are equally traumatized by religious, social, cultural, economic and institutionalized gender injustice, others are turned into sexists and chauvinists. And yet others are totally transformed into misogynistic monsters that rape and murder women in the name of Allāh. They hate, despise, and loathe women so much that they do not view such violations as sins or crimes. Islāmists claim that raping women is an act of "purification." They target the girls and women of the "infidels" along with "unchaste" Muslim women (Rasheed 183).

Islām, as a historical and lived reality, in both principle and practice, is a religion that is obsessed with women's bodies and behavior. It seeks to confine and control women. While it restricts the rights and freedoms of women, while hypocritically claiming to defend them, it grants men complete freedom to spread all the corruption that exists in Muslim communities all over the world. If Islām is what Muslims do, and Islām is what its primary texts say, then it is a religion of sexist double standards. If we judge Islām by its outcomes, the situation is catastrophic.

If we wish, we can always use the sources to promote a woman-loving version of Islām. However, it requires conceptual stretching and hermeneutical gymnastics. I have to bend over backwards to do so. Aside from the Qur'ān, the sources are almost entirely misogynistic. Yes, there were scholars who held that women could be prophets, that women could lead prayers, that women could be leaders in society, that the testimony of women was equal to that of men and that women were free and not to be confined. Yes, there were scholars who opposed the extremist interpretation of *ḥijāb*, scholars who opposed polygyny, scholars who insisted that 'A'ishah married at the age of 19 as opposed to 9, 7, and even 6, scholars who opposed child marriages, and sexual intimacy with infants, scholars who opposed slavery, and scholars who opposed beating wives. However, they were minorities of minorities and exceptions to the rule.

For some Muslim men and women, both scholars and laypeople, it is simply too exhausting to continue swimming upstream. They have come to the conclusion that Islām, in its current forms, is beyond redemption unless and until it is realigned with the primordial and perennial religion of God, the religion of Adam that will be revived by the Messiah and the Mahdī. In the meantime, I will pray through action.

I anticipate that this book will be used to educate Muslims, particularly Muslim women, about domestic violence. That would involve lectures at universities as well as classes at Islāmic centers and conferences. I expect the response to be one of extremes: extreme love or extreme hatred. I will make scores of enemies; however, I will also make scores of friends. I fully comprehend that this book could cost me my life. This fact alone debunks the myth of Muslim tolerance. However, I place my trust in the Creator.

The subject of this book touches me very personally. Over the past thirty years, I have been traumatized by domestic and sexual violence in Muslim communities. What scandalized me the most was hearing so called Shaykhs and Imāms ask battered women: "What did you do to provoke him?" Or tell them: "It is his right." I was pretty much raised and trained by *'ulamā'* or Muslim clerics since I was in my early teens. One of my teachers told a Muslim girl who had been raped by her father that "It is your choice if you want to forgive him." When I asked my teacher—"Did you report this to the authorities?"—he responded with silence and a perplexed look on his face. God forbid it would make the Muslim community look bad. By covering up these crimes, and being complicit to them, these Islāmic clerics made Muslims looks worse.

I knew a beautiful white Canadian convert. She was in her early teens. Her mother embraced Islām and so did she. She wore *ḥijāb*. Her mother was foolish enough to temporarily marry a Pakistani Shī'ite Muslim. The predator

drugged and sexually assaulted his teenage stepdaughter. Nobody stood by the victim. The community came to the defense of the culprit. Over and over again, it was nothing but cover up, cover up, and cover up. When it came to matters of abuse, both physical and sexual, Muslim scholars made the Roman Catholic Church look transparent. I could go on and on with similar cases that I witnessed. One Muslim brother called a cleric. He told him that his wife was cheating on him. He asked him what he should do. The Muslim scholar ordered him to "Beat her up and divorce her." And that is exactly what he did. So when I write this book, I write it as an insider: not an outsider.

I know all about the double discourse. I came from a cultural background that respected women and recognized their rights. If I was attracted to Islām, it was due to its combination of spirituality and social justice. In Ṣūfism, I heard echoes of the indigenous spirituality in which I had been immersed most of my life: the teachings that had been transmitted to the Eastern Woodland Indians, the Lakota, and others, for ages, the spiritual path that the Great Spirit had shown us through sacred women; namely, female prophets and saints like White Buffalo Calf Woman.

While I could relate to the spirituality of Islām, I could not relate to its sexism. It was blasphemous and sacrilegious. It seemed as if the seeds of Satan had been planted in the Garden of Islām. Rather than uproot them, Muslim scholars had been caring for the weeds while ripping out the flowers or crushing them under foot. Some traditional indigenous people are far closer to Islām, submission and surrender to the Creator, than most Muslims. They could learn a thing or two from the Koguis for whom God is One and God is Mother. They view men and women as equals and complimentary pairs. They prohibit the mistreatment of women.

When explaining the rules that limited the rights of women, Muslim scholars claimed that Islām acted out of respect. They insisted that Islām treated women with dignity and wanted to protect them. However, as my knowledge increased, and I was able to access primary sources in Arabic, I realized that these were not the reasons invoked by traditionists, exegetes, and jurists. If the rights of women were restricted in Islām, it was because women were evil by nature and posed an existential threat to the male-dominated social order. *Ḥijāb* and *purdah* were not about protecting women: they were was about protecting men *from* women. These scholars were at war against women. To them, they were objects that were only good for one thing. They were inferior beings destined to be slaves and servants to men. "Lock up your women!" That summarizes the attitude of sexist Muslim scholars throughout the ages. Not only is a woman's place in the home, she is not even allowed to leave the home without the permission of her husband. And yet Imām 'Alī said: "Do not be a slave to others for Allāh created you free" (letter 31). Although

he said this to his son, al-Ḥasan, this principle applies to all people, both men and women.

Rather than make me a better person, my Muslim mentors and masters were determined to make me a misogynistic. It took me decades to purge myself from the impurities that they placed in my mind and soul. And still I suffer from Post-Islāmic-Stress-Disorder. This is not to say that I have left Islām. It merely means that I have rejected *his* Islām in favor of an Islām of equilibrium. I recognize that Muslim misogynists were never real Muslims in the first place and that the religion that they concocted has no connection to the Qur'ān and Islām as I understand them. Consequently, this is a work of contrition, repentance and atonement. It is an act of redemption.

I hope that this study will contribute to changing Hislām back into Islām, bring balance back into the Muslim force and the Muslim community, and inspire a religious, cultural, and legal revolution and renaissance in Muslim-majority nations. The people I admire most are people who can change their minds, evolve as it were. I am glad that I have attracted the attention of people open to that option and I am impressed that some Muslim men and scholars, who once ruled that husbands could physically discipline their wives, have experienced a change of heart, and completely reversed their rulings. That, my friends, is humility. Such are the true seekers of knowledge.

As I have repeated throughout this work, there are consequences to exegesis and women, by far, have born the blunt of them. As Ayesha S. Chaudhry expresses, "[t]he way one interprets Q. 4:34 has ramifications for the interpretations of other Qur'ānic verses" (2013: 28). Or, as Zība Mīr-Ḥosseinī has stated: "It is no exaggeration to say that this entire edifice of family law in Muslim legal tradition is built on the ways in which classical jurists understood this verse [4:34] and translated it into legal rulings" (Chaudhry 2013: 54–55, note 116, Mīr-Ḥosseinī 2012: n. pag.).

The dominant interpretation of 4:34 is alive and well in most of the Muslim world. In Iraq, as in so many other Arab nations, the penal code allows husbands to discipline their wives. The situation in the Muslim parts of Africa sheds light on the broader problem. As Godpower O. Okereke explains,

> *Sharī'ah* tends to be interpreted in ways that give men power over women family members; dominant interpretations of the *sharī'ah* treat women as legal minors and accord men the status of heads of their families with guardianship authority and responsibility for women. As a result, women have a duty to obey their guardians—husbands, fathers, and other male heads of the family. . . . Also, under the *sharī'ah* penal code in Nigeria—as in other African countries with large Muslim populations—a husband has the right to beat his wife as long as the beating does not result in grievous harm, which is defined as loss of sight, hearing, power of speech, facial disfigurement, or other life-endangering injuries. . . . (2007: 3)

Despite diligent efforts, Iraq has yet to legislate against domestic violence. The same goes for dozens of Muslim countries. Iran, Chad, Morocco, Qatar, Djibouti, Niger, Egypt, Oman, Syria, Lebanon, the Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mauritania, Yemen, Palestine, Uzbekistan, Mali, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Kuwait all lack laws against domestic violence (Sawe 2018: n. pag., Alfred 2014: n. pag.). The claim that Islāmic law and Muslim societies protect women against domestic violence is naïve, emotional, ignorant, ill-informed and delusional. In both theory and practice, the Islāmic legal system, as interpreted and applied throughout most of the Muslim world, from mildly Islāmized secular law to strict *sharī'ah* law, provides little to no protection against domestic violence. Iran has been a so-called Islāmic Republic ruled by *sharī'ah* law since 1979. Forty years have passed, and the government has yet to pass any legislation prohibiting domestic violence.

If women are looking for rights, respect, and empowerment through male dominated Islām, Islāmic law, and Islāmism, they are looking in the wrong place. They might find it in spiritual Islām, on a personal level, by being highly selective. However, they will find themselves in constant conflict with cultural communities that are profoundly patriarchal, sexist, and misogynistic. As much as they try, they will never find an integral Islāmic society that embodies the best of Islām. In theory, Islāmic law is presented as some sort of utopia. In practice, however, it is very much a dystopia when it comes to the rights of women. Western women who embrace misogynistic Islām in search of women's rights are like abolitionists who marry slave owners, suffragists who marry anti-suffragists or civil rights activists who marry segregationists and white supremacists.

For some retrograde Muslims, 4:34 means that women are prohibited from even speaking to a non-related male. Women are not to be seen and they are not to be heard. For radical Islāmists, the interpretation of 4:34 is so extreme that is prohibits all women from exercising any form of authority. Moḥammad Sarwar, the terrorist cleric and Qur'ān teacher who killed Zilla Huma Usman (1970–2007), the Punjab Provincial Minister for Social Welfare, alluded to the first part of 4:34 when he stated that: "I have no regrets. I just obeyed God's commandment. Islām did not allow women to hold positions of leadership. I will kill all those women who do not follow the right path, if I am freed again" (Ḥusseinī 2012:114). He had previously murdered and mutilated four prostitutes (Taipei Times 2007: n. pag.). He was reputed to be a pious man. He was put to death on January 27, 2012. Such people, who wish to put 4:34 and 33:33 into practice, are also found in the Western world: "Indeed, in London a devout Muslim man, named Sunny Islām, set about raping and beating non-Muslim women because they were, in his judgement,

behaving lewdly by being out at night without a controlling father, husband, or brother" (McLoughlin 2014: 235–236).

As far as Reza Aslan is concerned, it is men, and not the Qur'ān that is to blame. If 4:34 was given a misogynistic interpretation, it was because the commentary of Scripture "has been the exclusive domain of Muslim men" (2011: 69). As Tāj Hashmī explains,

> [T]hanks to the subjective interpretations of the Qur'ān (almost exclusively by men), the preponderance of the misogynic mullahs and the regressive *sharī'ah* law in most "Muslim" countries, Islām is synonymously known as a promoter of misogyny in its worst form. Although there is no way of defending the so-called "great" traditions of Islām as libertarian and egalitarian with regard to women, we may draw a line between the Qur'ānic texts and the corpus of avowedly misogynic writing and spoken words by the mullahs having very little or no relevance to the Qur'ān. (2000: 37)

Increasingly, there are Muslim scholars, women and men, who are willing to hold the culprits accountable. Their readings and rulings were wrong. It is high time to produce new readings and rulings that are morally and ethically right. The entire jurisprudence of women needs to be revisited and revamped. In fact, as Fazlur Raḥmān proposed in *Islām and Modernity*, the entire Islāmic intellectual tradition requires a critical reassessment. Since "the true message of Islām concerning women was rarely practiced throughout the past 14 centuries of Muslim history," Nimat Ḥāfeẓ Barazāngī calls upon "women scholar-activists who self-identify with Islām" to take it upon themselves "to reinterpret the Qur'ān to change attitudes about gender" (2013: 257).

By changing images, attitudes, and perceptions, we can help change cultures and legal systems. We must, however, educate and empower women to do so. For it to be effective, the change must come from within. Where strong laws against domestic violence are in place, they act as an effective deterrent. As Judith K. Brown notes, "[t]he incidence of wife beating is reduced whenever sanctions are certain, immediate, and severe, regardless of whether they take the form of wrath and retribution from the spirits of her ancestors . . . or of retaliation from her living kin or result in incarceration and fines imposed by a law enforcement agency" (1992: 16). Such is not the case in the United States.

As Judith K. Brown notes, "In US society there is supposed disapproval of both wife beating and wife battering. However, this is no deterrent, since American men seem to perceive the sanctions as neither certain nor severe, according to a chilling survey" (1992: 4–5). It is frowned upon and it is illegal, and yet more than 22% of American men physically assault their wives. In the Muslim world, and in Muslim communities in the Western world,

Muslim men are taught by their elders that God allows and even commands them to beat their disobedient wives. No wonder we have rates of patriarchal terrorism as high as 87% in Afghanistan (Global Rights 2008: n. pag.) and 99% in Pakistan (Fikree and Bhatti 1999, International Women's Tribune Center 1987, Miller 1992: 207, Express Tribune 2012: n. pag., 'Alī 2007: 28). You reap what you sow. And you will know them by their fruits.

Conclusions

If, following option one, we interpret 4:34 independently, then dozens upon dozens of interpretations for *iḍribūhunna* are in order. These could be colored by the *ḥadīth* literature, *tafsīr* literature, and/or jurisprudential literature. The verse could mean anything from "beat them" black and blue unconditionally to "beat them without severity." The verse could mean "leave them," "separate from them" or even "have sex with them." A purely linguistic or literary interpretation, devoid of any influence from Islāmic literature, provides the greatest freedom.

If the intended meaning of *iḍribūhunna* was "to beat," "to hit," or "to strike," it was not supposed to be severe. As we have seen, most Muslim scholars have described the three steps mentioned in 4:34 as progressive: to admonish, to banish from one's bed, and then to physically beat without causing a mark. This could be likened to laws in certain states and nations which permit the corporal punishment of minors so long as it is not cruel and unusual, is restricted to soft tissues, such as the buttocks, is delivered by means of an open hand, and leaves no marks, redness or bruises. To limit disciplinary domestic violence to a slap on the posterior is indeed a marked improvement in a culture where women were viewed as livestock and could be brutalized and even beaten to death with impunity.

In a context of dehumanization, the infantilization of women, however humiliating, would have been viewed as a step up the social ladder. This status, however, could only have been transitory until women reached full and complete emancipation. The problem, however, is that many Muslim jurists, from the seventh century to the present, have placed women in a state of perpetual servitude to supposedly superior men, subjugating them to male supremacist authority, relegating them to second-class status, and treating them like minors-for-life. As Asmā' Barlas puts it, "'the enveloping maleness' of Muslim

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